

CHEETAHS LIKELY TO ARRIVE IN KUNO BEFORE AUGUST 15

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New home: The agreement signed by India and Namibia on Wednesday will prepare the ground for the relocation of the first batch of cheetahs from southern Africa to Madhya Pradesh.

India came one step closer to bringing back the world's fastest animal to the country with an agreement signed in Delhi on Wednesday between the Union government and the visiting Namibian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of International Relations, Netumbo Nandi Ndaitwah.

The cheetah was declared extinct in the country in 1952, and the agreement, which has been negotiated for some years, will prepare the ground for the relocation of the first batch from southern Africa to the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh, with officials trying to complete the transfer before August 15.

"The [agreement] seeks to promote conservation and restoration of cheetah in their former range from which the species went extinct," Environment and Forests Minister Bhupender Yadav said in a tweet after the signing ceremony for what he called an "historic" MoU (memorandum of understanding), which took place in the presence of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

"Completing 75 glorious years of Independence with restoring the fastest terrestrial flagship species, the cheetah, in India, will rekindle the ecological dynamics of the landscape," he said.

The MoU focused on biodiversity conservation, and the sharing of expertise between the two countries, technological applications, collaborations on climate change, pollution and waste management, and the exchange of personnel for training and education in wildlife management. However, the government is yet to reveal whether it has already procured the cheetahs, how many will be transferred in the first trial, and when they are likely to be brought to India.

According to officials, plans for the cheetah translocations to Kuno are in compliance with the IUCN's guidelines, with particular focus on the forest site quality, prey density and the current carrying capacity for a large mammal like the cheetah. "While the current carrying capacity for the Kuno National Park is a maximum of 21 cheetahs, once restored, the larger landscape can hold about 36 cheetahs," said a note issued by the government on Wednesday, adding that the carrying capacity could be further enhanced by expanding the area to other parts of the Kuno wildlife division. Kuno had earlier been identified for the translocation of Gujarat's Gir lions, but the State government has refused to allow them to be transferred out, despite a Supreme Court order rejecting its pleas.

One-year trial

The cheetahs will arrive in India for a one-year trial. The project for the cheetah — the only wild cat to go extinct in Independent India — was put back on track in 2020 when the Supreme Court lifted a stay on the original proposal to introduce African cheetahs from Namibia into the Indian habitat on an experimental basis. In May 2012, the court had stalled the plan to initiate the foreign cheetahs into the Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh fearing they would come into conflict with the plan for bringing lions into the same sanctuary. The court had also expressed concern about whether the African cheetahs would find a favourable climate in the sanctuary.

The government said special programmes were being conducted to educate local villagers in Kuno including outreaches to “sarpanches [village head men], local leaders, teachers, social workers, religious figures and NGOs”, with a local mascot named “Chintu Cheetah” to sensitise populations to the importance of the project and guidelines for the cheetah-human interface.

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